

Corona Chronicles



Intersex Persons' COVID-19 Lockdown Stories



**Solidarity
Foundation**

HEINRICH
BÖLL
STIFTUNG
INDIA

Corona Chronicles

Intersex Persons' COVID-19 Lockdown Stories

Transcription : Challa Sudha Rani and Neeraja Sajan

Editing : C K Meena

Design : 1 Good Point

Contents

Introduction	1
Gangabhavani	3
Maya	9
Rita	17
Intersex persons – Tamil Nadu	24
Trupti	32
Vinaya	39

Introduction

In March 2020, the Government of India announced a nationwide lockdown due to the COVID-19. Many people, especially the socio-economically disadvantaged experienced extreme challenges accessing food, healthcare, transport, money, accommodation and other essential items. Persons with DSD and intersex variants particularly faced health issues but got insufficient support owing to minimal knowledge about their specific problems and needs.

This booklet contains first person narratives of how 8 intersex persons in 4 southern Indian states (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu) survived between March and August 2020. These stories would enlighten readers about intersex persons' lives and requirements.



Gangabhavani

Bhavani : Hi, good morning. I am Gangabhavani. I am an intersex person but I was forced to identify myself as a transgender woman because nobody in our society knows what intersex is. We observe that transgender persons face a lot of discrimination and stigma because neither society nor higher officials are aware about transgender or intersex people.

In this COVID-19 situation, I am struggling because I have no ration card or secure shelter to stay in. The pandemic has turned my life upside down. I can surely say that compared to average men and women, transgender persons are treated oppressively and considered lesser beings. The Intersex gender category to which I belong is not even recognised as an identity by society.

In these COVID-19 times, I had faced a difficult situation. On 18 March 2020 I had gone to Bangalore for my fellowship work, and from there I went to my friend's house in Ballari. I got stuck in Ballari because of the lockdown and with the help of my friend I returned to my Paying Guest (PG) hostel in Anantapur after 10 days. After reaching the hostel, I had the following conversation with the PG Management.

PG Management: Madam, the government has announced that all PG accommodations and hostels must be closed due to COVID. We have asked all the hostellers to vacate their rooms and leave for their homes.

Bhavani : I don't have any other shelter to go to. I am not on talking terms with my family. Please allow me to stay here.

PGM : If you can get the permission from the concerned police authorities, we can allow you to stay here.

Then, I went to police station with my luggage to take permission to stay in the PG. I requested the police:

Bhavani : “I am Gangabhavani, an intersex woman identifying as a transgender woman. I am staying in a PG Hostel.”

Police : Show me your identity proofs.

(I showed them my Aadhar card and Election ID card.)

Police : In the Election card it shows that you are Gangabhavani and your gender is Transgender, but why are you saying that you are Intersex?

Bhavani : Our society lacks knowledge about intersex, so I was forcibly marked as a transgender woman.

Police : Fine. Tell me about your problem.

Bhavani : Due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation, our PG hostel management is not allowing me to stay there. I do not have any other place to go to, and I can't stay with my parents. Due to social discrimination I am not being accepted for what I am. So please allow me to stay in the PG hostel.

Police : Sorry Ma, we got strict orders from the DIG of Police that no one should stay in PG hostels. You can stay here [police station] until we deal with this lockdown situation.

They gave me a room in the police station. They provided breakfast, lunch and dinner for 10 days. One day the DSP came for a visit to the police station. He raised a question about me.

DSP : Who is this girl and why has she been here for 10 days? You can't stay here. You need to stay in a women's shelter home. We can only give you temporary shelter.

Later they took me to a women's shelter home. There were 16 people there. We suffered because of insufficient food. They served breakfast between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. and we got lunch only at 3 p.m. We used to store the lunch for our dinner but because there was no cool storage and the weather was hot, with temperatures over 40 degrees Celsius, the food would get spoilt. All the residents posed questions to me such as: What is the meaning of intersex? Do you menstruate? How will you get your periods? Because of your menstruation are you recognised as a girl? Then why can't you marry? If you can marry, you may have children, right? Those questions really pained and troubled me a lot.

I couldn't sleep at night because of regular police patrolling and their sudden visits to the home. At midnight they would tell me things like: "Don't open your door when unknown people knock on it. You have to take care of yourself."

In those 15 days of COVID-19 lockdown it was very difficult for me to get timely meals and enough sleep. At this time I got my period. When I menstruate I have to take hormone injections and other medicines. To buy those medicines I went to the medical store with the help of another resident of the shelter home. Midway we were stopped by a policeman.

His conversation with me:

Police : Where are you going?

Bhavani : Sir, we are going for medicine.

Police : Which medicine?

Bhavani : Sir, I am an intersex woman, I need to have hormone injections every month during the time of my menstruation cycle, which is prescribed by the doctor. So I am going to have those injections.

Police : What is intersex? Who suggested this prescription? Where did you get this prescription? What medicine are you using?

Bhavani : Usually I take my treatment in Delhi, Bangalore and Hyderabad. But I got stuck here because of this COVID situation. To maintain my health I need to have these injections without fail.

After our discussion, the policeman permitted me to go to the medical store. I bought the medicine and came back to my shelter home. The medicine I got had the same drug combination but the manufacturing company was different from the one I regularly buy. Perhaps this was the reason why I developed a severe stomach ache and heavy bleeding. I informed the police of my condition and they came to the shelter home to take me to hospital. The warden of the shelter accompanied me.

Hospitals are always a harrowing experience for me because whichever hospital I visit, the very first question people ask after noticing that the identity on my card is Transgender is: “Do you menstruate?” Every time and everywhere this question chases me like hell. It really breaks my heart. I just feel like ending my life. It is a constant reminder of how I was forced to self-identify as Transgender because society does not recognise or correctly define Intersex.

At this hospital too I was asked the same question. I explained to the doctor by showing all my health records that this is a genetic issue. I told him that I used to take this treatment in Delhi, Hyderabad and Bangalore during my monthly period, and that I bought a different company's hormone injection this time which might have caused my distress. The female doctor then took me to the observation room and applied lignocaine gel for internal checkup. While doing the check-up she started asking meupsetting questions like, who caused this bleeding and where it is

coming from? While returning to the shelter home after the treatment I started thinking, “Why does this society have no awareness about intersex? Why is everyone constantly harassing me with such behaviour?”

On my way back to my shelter, I came across five or six transgender persons.

Transgender : Sister, we had seen you in the Batuku Jatka Bandi Show. You have spoken about us and our lifestyle, which is excellent. But for the two months of COVID lockdown, we’ve had no shelter, no work, and no food to eat. Now we are on the streets.

I was deeply saddened by their situation. They took my mobile number and called me after I reached the shelter, asking whether I could get them some food. Immediately I called Pushpa (of Solidarity Foundation) and told them about the transgender persons going hungry. They said Solidarity Foundation would address the problem.

One day I got a call from Pushpa.

Police : We deposited some amount into your account, now you can transfer it to the individual transgender people to buy food.

I called the transgender persons and informed them that right then I was going through my menses cycle, and once it was over, I would distribute the necessary relief packages.

Because of the social distancing issue the police objected to 16 people staying in one room at the shelter, and they shifted some of us to the Sakhi one-stop centre. I was very happy to stay at the Sakhi centre because they served food on time and had neat and clean washrooms and premises. However, the rules of the centre stipulate that you can stay only for one week. Once again, I had nowhere to stay.

That was when I met a friend, a former classmate of the Nursing course I had done. She asked me how I had landed up here and I explained all that had happened to me. She told me there was a room vacant in her neighbourhood, close to where she stayed. I waited for one whole day to get police permission to stay there.

The days were passing smoothly after I shifted to the room near my friend's home. I was very happy to see the announcement that the lockdown was lifted. But at the same time I heard bad news that in our area a woman who came from Mumbai was affected with COVID-19. After that our area was announced as a Red Zone.

Meanwhile I forgot to tell you something that had happened when I was at the hostel. I had spoken to Pushpa about my stomach ache and they had referred me to a Dr Rohit. I called him.

Bhavani : Sir, I got your number from Solidarity Foundation. I am Gangabhavani, an intersex person identifying as a transgender woman. I got my menses during this lockdown. I'm stuck here and am not able to get the hormone injections either. Please help me to procure hormone medicines.

Dr. Rohit: You can't get these medicines through the government or find them in private stores. Anyhow I will try to get you the medicines, but I can't give you any assurance about it.

So, this was my situation during the pandemic and am facing now in society, with a gender that is not even recognised and doctors who are not aware of the right treatment.

Maya

Gangabhavani : Hi Maya, how were you before the COVID-19 outbreak and how did you survive the three-month lockdown period? What difficulties did you face for getting medicines and other things?

Maya : Before COVID-19, for medical issues I usually used to consult the doctor and get myself the required medicines. But during the tough times of the COVID lockdown, I was unable to step outside. I have no personal vehicle and neither public transport nor cab service was available.

Once I had heavy bleeding and I used the medicines I had stocked up beforehand. The bleeding appeared to decrease but it started again, heavily, the next day. I asked Pushpa [of Solidarity Foundation] to help me; they recommended a doctor and gave me contact details. I arranged for a cab to visit that doctor. The ride was only 9 km long but the driver demanded Rs. 800 and after negotiation he charged Rs. 500. Usually it would cost me around Rs. 80 to Rs. 100 but he overcharged me hugely.

The doctor tested and fingered me and told me that I had no infection. She gave me a powder and told me to add it to a tub full of warm water and sit in it for 10 minutes daily. I followed that procedure for a few days. She had also asked me to do dilation daily which I didn't do as I dislike it. She also asked me if I had any intercourse and I said no. She told me that intercourse should happen.

Gangabhavani : Yes, it should happen.

Maya : I told her that I am not interested in having intercourse for now. Then she told me to take care of myself and use the medicines correctly without fail.

Gangabhavani : Did she treat you well or did she question you about who did it [the surgery] and where they did it?

Maya : Yes she asked me many questions like that. She already knew the process I underwent but she asked me what it was and where I did it and how long the whole process took. She then gave me some medicines. Despite taking them the same problems continued. So she referred me to another doctor.

Gangabhavani : On the way to the doctor, did the police trouble you or stop you from travelling from one place to another?

Maya : No police stopped me or troubled me, but I faced problems with cab drivers. They kept questioning me about where and why I was going. They would take advantage of the journey to chat with me constantly. The medicines I bought after visiting the doctor would cost me around Rs. 500 but the cost I would incur for the travel alone would be Rs. 1000. As I was referred to St. John's Hospital I went there. Initially, I was not allowed to enter the hospital but on my request, after explaining my condition to them, they let me in. There I visited a male endocrinologist who asked me a few uncomfortable questions.

Gangabhavani : What questions did he ask you?

Maya : He asked me if the blood has a smell. How does the blood feel? What colour is it? Do you get any pain? How do you feel during that time? I would have felt more comfortable if it had been a female doctor. And I was later taken to a senior doctor (chief), also male. He prescribed the medicine Progynova for a few days. But I was not sure how Progynova was related to my problem, so I consulted a female doctor who referred me to a gynaecologist. When I visited that gynaecologist, she made me lie down, fingered me and suggested that I undergo a swab test. She inserted a swab inside me, twirled it, and sent the blood on it for testing.

Gangabhavani : When did they say the test report would be ready?

Maya : In 3 days. But I got the report only 5 days later after paying Rs. 1800. I took many tablets, perhaps over 9 daily — like I was eating a meal! I had joint aches, nausea, indigestion, migraine, and also fainted sometimes. It was very difficult for me initially and later I felt okay. I visited the doctor again after 5 days and collected the report. I was told that my condition had improved and was prescribed around 7 tablets.

Gangabhavani : Presently you are not working, so how were you able to afford these medicines and other things?

Maya : I asked Pushpa if it was at all possible to provide me some money and they said there were no funds at the moment. As my bleeding continued, I asked my friends and they loaned me money. I even had

to sell off some equipment to one of my friends and this money helped pay for two visits to the doctor. The third time I had to ask my grandmother for money. She too faced financial problems and yet she gave me Rs. 2000, forgoing her own need for the sake of my health. On my later visit to the doctors they gave me another course of medicines, but I wasn't happy with the medicines or treatment provided in St. John's Hospital. They didn't reveal what the condition was but kept on prescribing new medicines on every visit. After a few days I had a throat infection and I was scared that I had caught Corona virus. Then I thought of visiting a government hospital because I was falling short of funds. But I wasn't allowed in. The security guard allowed everyone inside except me.

Gangabhavani : I'm really sorry to hear that! Did they ask you any uncomfortable questions?

Maya : Nothing uncomfortable or anything but they simply asked me to leave and told me that I shouldn't go inside. So I asked the guard, "Sir, you are sending everybody else, why am I not allowed to go inside?" He simply replied that I "shouldn't go". Then I told him, "I need to go because I have high fever, you may check my temperature if you want". He then let me in and I took the Outpatient (OP) sheet to consult a doctor. I told him about my sore throat and he told me that it was nothing to worry about, just a throat infection. He gave me a few tablets to take for 5 days. But even after 5 days of taking the tablets the throat pain persisted. So I visited the government hospital again.

I was worried whether I might be COVID positive and the receptionist directed me to a doctor dealing with COVID patients. I told the doctor that I had a cold and gastric problems but no fever. She replied that it was a gastro-esophagus reflux, prescribed a few medicines to take before and after food, and gave me some tips to ease the discomfort. I told her I didn't have money to buy medicines and asked her to give me whatever was available in the hospital and the rest I would try to buy from outside. I was given three different medicines, and I bought the rest from outside. The doctor in the government hospital treated me well and I am satisfied with my visit there. I was also relieved when she told me to not to worry and that I didn't have the Corona virus.

Then I left for home. At home, I found it tough to buy groceries and food. Harsha called me, and through him with the help of Solidarity Foundation I received an amount with which I paid the house rent for one month. I couldn't pay rent for the next month because I also had other expenses including the water and electricity bills. I had a talk with the landlord and told him that since I wouldn't be able to pay any more rent he could deduct the rental from the advance I paid before moving in. I also had some equipment with me which I sold to my friends who lived nearby. Then I was able to buy groceries. I cooked only the barest amount of food needed for survival. Sometimes I cooked plain rice and curry and there are times when I ate just plain rice with water.

I felt more healthy after a while, and thought of going to the hospital for a checkup. But I couldn't, because even to visit a government hospital I would require a minimum of Rs. 500 for a cab ride, and I couldn't afford it. So I gave up the idea of a checkup.

I used to contact a cousin who is a doctor on the phone. I would text him the details of my current health problem and he would text back which medicines I should take. I would buy the medicines for about Rs. 50 or so from a nearby pharmacy. And sometimes I also used to ask my friends for money. I tried my best to survive through those days.

I joined Vodafone and worked for 15 days. They only paid me 30% of the monthly salary saying that since it was a work-from home job they couldn't pay me the regular amount. I used the money to pay back some of my loans and saved some money for emergencies.

The lockdown was on the verge of being lifted and I heard that we could travel across the state border. I thought it wouldn't be possible to survive in this state and so I booked a cab; I used up all my money to pay my landlord the backlog of rent, and to pay the cab driver. I packed only what was crucially important to me and gave away what was unnecessary to my friends who had helped me when I was in need.

I came to my parental home. After I reached home I thought to myself, why did I come here? Because at home I had no privacy, couldn't dress comfortably, found it difficult to use the toilet, and was even restricted from going out. My brother lived there

with his family. Although my own parents were not that strict I had a lot of issues with my brother's family. They talked disrespectfully to me and gave me funny looks. I also heard them talk behind my back, saying things like "Why does she have to live? What's the use of her living like this? It's better that she dies, then everything will be all right". My mom used to console me and tell me not to feel bad and to keep quiet. She used to say that god would take care of everything for me. I didn't want to create any trouble and so I stayed silent. I survived day by day, hoping for a better tomorrow.

Gangabhavani : How was the food situation at home?

Maya : We buy rice once every 6 months, and also get the government's monthly ration rice. It was difficult but we managed somehow. My mom pawned some of her jewellery. I told her we would buy it back when everything got back to normal. The only difficulty I faced was not being able to afford my medicines.

Gangabhavani : Did your father accept your presence?

Maya : Father was okay about my being there, and I too had to adjust to the circumstances because I had abandoned everything to stay here and I had no choice. My mom supports me and I am thinking of staying here for quite some time.

Gangabhavani : Where do you plan to work after the lockdown is lifted?

Maya : I've already joined Vodafone and training is going on now. Once the lockdown is lifted, I will go to work in that company.

Gangabhavani : So, is this your present lockdown situation?

Maya : Yes. Right now I stay at home. My dad isn't going to office. He has piles, and we had planned for his surgery but he couldn't go through it. My mom has been having a tough time since I returned home. She gets severe backaches. Buying her medicines, buying my medicines — all this is very difficult. It's almost as if we have prioritized medicines over groceries. I would definitely welcome any help in buying groceries and medicines.

Gangabhavani : Okay sure.

Maya : So, this is my current situation. And recently I also started getting calls from the person who had previously trapped me in Chennai. His name is Jagan; he is gay but tells everyone that he's a trans woman. He threatened me on the phone. He said that he since he had helped me immensely during my surgery and bought me things, I should repay him now. I told him that I was facing tough times but he demanded money. I got angry and cried while speaking to him, challenging him to do whatever he wanted. I have saved all our conversations. He threatened to kidnap me and take me to Chennai, where I should go begging to earn money to pay him back.

Gangabhavani : So, is this your complete lockdown history?

Maya : Yeah.

Gangabhavani : Thank you so much for sharing this information about your lockdown survival, Maya.

Maya : With pleasure. I will always be available for you.

Maya : Please give me a brief introduction about yourself. How was life for you before lockdown? Do you stay in a rented house or your own house? How did you go to and from work, what types of medication were you taking, were you visiting the doctor monthly or were you stocking up on medicines prescribed by him?

Rita : My name is Rita and I live in Bangalore. I work in an IT consulting firm as a Marketing Strategist. I am an Intersex woman, born with undeveloped ovaries and uterus which had to be removed. My body therefore doesn't produce hormones and because I am below 30 I've been taking hormone therapy for the last 4-5 years. I currently live in a rented house. I don't have both parents so I live alone. I buy medicines monthly and I have an endocrinologist here whom I occasionally visit. Before COVID-19 I used to consult the doctor once every three months and get my blood test and hormone level monitored. I don't take any other medication related to my intersex condition.

Maya : Okay, is there anything else that you want to say?

Rita : I have another condition which is rare in most cases similar to mine. I have a mental health issue called "generalized anxiety disorder" and I take medication to control my anxiety. Apart from this I also have ADHD which is Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. So, I have been taking medication for these both conditions regularly for quite a few years. I also have a psychiatrist and a therapist whom I consult.

So, my life before the pandemic was like this. I used to work from home and only go to office twice or thrice a week as my office hours are very flexible. I live alone and I am single, with pets for company.

Maya : Okay, the reason why I am asking you about the impact of COVID-19 in your life is because many people lost their livelihood during the lockdown. Did you get your salary in full when working from home? Did you have trouble paying rent? When you wanted to visit hospitals did anyone object? Please share any such difficulties you faced.

Rita : During the nationwide lockdown in March, it was really difficult for me, especially because I live alone and couldn't go out of the house. I'm not only talking from my perspective of being intersex; any single woman who lives alone would face difficult times in a lockdown, and if you are also a young woman it's even more difficult.

Luckily, I didn't have any salary issues during the lockdown as my company is an IT consulting firm and I was productive enough when working from home. But the major problem I faced is that because a few Corona virus cases cropped up in my area it became a containment zone and I couldn't even go out to the nearby market or accept any online delivery for groceries. I had to stay in the containment zone for almost 2 months.

Doctors and civic officials were visiting us. I explained to them how vital my medications were for my mental and physical health. Without hormonal production, after removal of my genital organs, it is almost as if I'm going through menopause. Since I have been regularly taking medication for years together, if I give it a sudden break my body will obviously have a reaction, I'll have mood swings and other symptoms. I told the health officer and the others

that these hormone-related medicines are very important for me, but they told me that this isn't life-threatening medication and only if the situation is that serious they would consider giving me permission to go out of the containment zone. There were police and guards all the time on my street, and no online deliveries were allowed into the area.

So, those two months without medication were really difficult for me. One thing I didn't expect from the health officials was the change in their behaviour after I told them about my Intersex status and explained my entire medical history. They suddenly started treating me differently even though they couldn't help me. I am from Kerala and I speak fluent Telugu but not fluent Kannada. So, while talking to one of the health officers, he told me to speak in Kannada and I told them I am not fluent enough in it.

The main problem that I faced during lockdown was the lack of medicines for my mental condition and hormone production. You know how important it is to take psychiatrist-prescribed medicines without fail every day. Missing them for even one day would have after-effects. I had to go without medication for 2 months, which affected my work and mental state. I went into depression and I am embarrassed to say that I was suicidal.

Maya : Okay.

Rita : You know how if we stay alone we easily feel depressed. But thank god, I didn't let anything bad happen and I spoke to my therapist and my friends to make me feel better. I think this was one of the most difficult times I passed. Some of the female nurses from the city corporation used to visit us and although they possess enough knowledge about aspects of health, they were unable to understand my situation and

the severity of my condition. I explained my Intersex status to one of the nurses and she must have told everyone else because after that the nurses' behaviour changed. They started speaking sarcastically to me and the male health officials were staring at me in a peculiar way. When they visited our area daily to check temperatures and distribute masks their behaviour towards me was discriminatory.

So I faced two problems: unavailability of medicines, and the way the corporation people treated me. I wanted to complain about them, but as a woman living alone I feared that it might create further problems for me.

Maya : Yeah.

Rita : They behave this way because they feel they are better than us. It's feeling of superiority. They were really surprised to know I had a decent job in the IT sector. But thank god it's all over now. Once the containment zone restrictions were lifted we don't need to rely on anyone for anything and we can go about our life and work as usual.

Maya : An important question I want to ask you is about doctors in general being unaware about intersex-related health concerns and male doctors asking probing questions. During lockdown, when your regular doctors were perhaps unavailable and you reached out to new doctors, did you face uncomfortable questions or situations? Did you go to the doctor in your own vehicle or take a cab? If you used cab services did drivers try to take advantage of you or disrespect you or ask unwanted questions?

Rita : Actually, I did face such problems. Not during the lockdown but before that. During the lockdown I was in contact with my regular psychiatrist whom I've been seeing for many years. But before the pandemic I had an experience which I

will share now. My friend who is a trans woman had referred me to an endocrinologist who lives near my home. I always tell doctors about my intersex status and my surgery. After I told him my medical history, the way he was questioning me and looking at me was kind of awkward and made me uncomfortable. I caught him staring at my breasts many times and he even asked me about them, questions like “Why did your breast grow this much? Didn’t you have any surgery to remove them?” I understood that he didn’t have a clear idea about intersex women. Being an endocrinologist, he should have been asking me questions like if I have androgen intensity or if I take hormone production medication, or where and why I did the surgery. Instead of asking me such normal questions but was saying things like “Oh! Looking at you no one can easily identify you as intersex.”

Then he asked me if I needed SRS [sex reassignment surgery] in case my vagina wasn’t functional. I told him I had a vaginoplasty because my vagina was not fully developed. He asked me suggestively whether my life was all fun after getting a vaginoplasty. I realized that he wanted to know my sexual history, which I thought was unnecessary. He told me that he had to physically examine me and see how “developed” I was, and asked whether he could take a picture of the development in my body parts. I said I’m sorry sir, I’m very uncomfortable with it and I can’t show you anything. And I left the place.

Maya : This person was a doctor?

Rita : He is an endocrinologist practising medicine in Bangalore. I was really shocked by his behaviour.

Maya : Yes, it must have really been a horrible experience for you.

Rita : Another bad experience was with a male doctor, a urologist whom I visited for a minor issue related to UTI(urinary tract infection). He also made me uncomfortable by saying he wanted to physically examine me. I am not saying that I shouldn't let any doctor examine me, but when a doctor says he want to physically examine you, you can tell by the look in their eyes if they are asking in a sexual sense or not.

I also had an experience when I went for an X-Ray. I got a different kind of behaviour and treatment after they knew about my intersex status. The treatment that the average human being gets and that a person who is intersex or any other gender gets after their sexual status is revealed is so different. But it is true that I have also had satisfying experiences and good treatment from doctors. There are doctors who treat me well and doctors who make me feel uncomfortable.

Maya : Okay, my final question: during this lockdown when you were forced to order things online, did any delivery guy bringing your stuff misbehave with you?

Rita : Talking about sexual harassment, it has happened a lot of times with me. I usually go to get my groceries from a supermarket nearby but because of the lockdown I had to order them online. I usually order food and other items through Swiggy. Many of the delivery guys ask me if there's any "sir" around or if I am living with anyone. Whether day or night it's always me who opens the door, and when I receive the order they ask me questions like "Is there anyone else at home? Do you stay alone? Are you married?" One man in particular who regularly delivers stuff to me asks me questions and looks at me in a weird way which is very irritating and discomfiting.

Once a Swiggy guy took my phone from my hand, saved my number and started texting me saying, “I deliver food to your house and I find you really beautiful, if you’re interested we can chat.”

Delivery guys do observe if we women are single and try to take advantage of the situation, which I think is very bad and needs to be corrected. Be it for women, trans women, intersex women, non-binary gender and everyone else, I think ours is a very difficult society to live in.

Intersex persons – Tamil Nadu

George

George : How do you do?

Maya : I am doing good. I hope you are also well.

George : Yes.

Maya : As you know, lockdown was imposed worldwide. I am calling to ask how were you doing before the lockdown and how are you now? Can we talk about this?

George : Sure. Earlier I was working regularly. It was daily wage work in construction. During the two-month lockdown we couldn't leave home, and there were even police patrols in our village to enforce it. I couldn't even step out of our house to buy groceries and vegetables. Even if I had been able to, I would have had no money to buy petrol for my vehicle.

Fortunately, even in such a situation, living in the village helped. We have farms here; my mother works on a farm and she would bring home vegetables. Even during the lockdown when we couldn't go to work, we were able to buy farm produce because vehicles carrying tomatoes or onions would come around to our houses. We got our basic necessities; we were at least able to stop short of starving. I had financial problems, however. I had taken loans and the repayment came to a complete standstill.

Maya : Did anyone give you monetary support?

George : Well, Siva from Chennai sent me Rs.1000. I think it was through an organisation, a foundation. We can get by without soap for taking a bath, we can use plain water, but

we can't do without food. We need something to eat—at least rice and vegetable. If we don't have vegetable we need at least a pickle, but we also need money to buy pickle! That money I got was extremely helpful

People in my village who are living in rented homes were facing real hardship. We have our own house, it is small and has a tiled roof but it is ours. Others have to pay rent, water and electricity charges etc.

Maya : Yes, they would have faced more trouble.

George : Some were even asked to vacate their houses if they couldn't pay the rent. This happened to people I know who lived nearby.

Maya : Being in a rented house has been very hard for me. But I am going forward with the thought that we have to somehow handle all of this.

George : During the lockdown things were really bad. I would think twice before spending even ten rupees to buy vegetables and wonder if I should save it for future necessities. But now I can buy what I need without hesitating since I am going to work. I am happy that we will have food to eat even if I don't earn enough to repay my loans.

Maya : Living in a village, travelling to hospitals would have been difficult during the lockdown. Did you face any health problems then?

George : On the day before the lockdown I started experiencing severe abdominal pain which I later found out was because of kidney stones. I went to the General Hospital at night but they just gave me a medicine that induced vomiting [an emetic drug]. When I approached a private hospital they told me they could not treat me because of the corona virus

restrictions. I knocked on their door for a week but they kept telling me the same thing. Then I took some natural remedies [native medicine] and somehow pulled through for a month.

After a month when the pain flared up again I tried another hospital which took an ultrasound scan and told me I have kidney stones that would prove costly to remove. Besides, the doctor would be available only after the corona virus situation was under control. Till date, no hospitals are ready to do any surgery. I don't know whether they are only treating extremely critical cases but they are definitely not taking on cases like mine.

Maya : So till now you've been unable to receive any treatment?

George : I can only be treated if doctors are there! Out Patient doctors come in for some time and then they leave, and only the doctor on call will be there. Also, they are not allowing too many people to enter, they're only treating patients with serious conditions.

Maya : Are you taking medicines?

George : They gave me medicines for 10 days and said my surgery and treatment would cost around Rs. 80,000. I can't afford such a large amount so I decided to go in for native natural remedies. I am still following that regimen.

Maya : But if you are following native medicine won't you have to follow a strict diet?

George : Yes, I am following the diet, now I am used to it.

Maya : Good. So now you are able to manage without too much difficulty.

George : Well sometimes the pain flares up and then I take rest and take care not to exert myself.

People like us who depend on daily wages were very badly affected during the lockdown. Those who received monthly salary were given at least half the salary. The average person in society usually has someone in the family to support them: like husband and wife, father and son, mother and daughter will have each other for support. But it's not the same for the intersex community. Some might live with their families but others would have left their families and wouldn't have anyone to turn to. The government should make provisions for such people.

Maya : Yes, I completely agree with you. Unfortunately, even now many do not even know about intersex people. But hopefully it will change in the future.

So now, George, things are changing for the better. Relief measures are underway. We can all pray together that this situation changes very soon.

George : That's all we can do for now.

Karim

Maya : Hi Karim! I am calling on behalf of Solidarity Foundation, my name is Shakthisree Maya. I wish to understand what you were doing before the COVID-19 lockdown was declared and how you have been managing during the lockdown. What were you doing before the lockdown?

Karim : I was doing painting work near Pappampatti around 40km from my home. I would travel daily by motorbike, about an hour's journey each way. It was not regular work; they would call me when there was work and then I would go. It is hard work and doesn't pay that well, and I had to spend Rs. 100 to 200 for petrol alone.

Maya : During lockdown did you get work?

Karim : I didn't get any painting work. My mother is a construction worker and if I went with her we could both earn some money, but when the total lockdown was imposed the situation became dire. I was able to manage for about a week but after that we struggled even for food and other necessities. We couldn't go out, there was no income, we couldn't pay my motorbike loan, and people started asking for money we owed them.

Maya : Did you get any financial assistance?

Karim : Once, the government provided us rice and some groceries. Then the Solidarity Foundation gave me Rs. 2000.

Maya : I am happy to hear this. That would have helped you take care of your needs for a few days.

Karim : It helped for some days but wasn't enough to satisfy all our monetary needs. The government had assured us of a loan waiver but then they said we have to repay the loan right away. They came to our house, demanded we clear the bike loan, and since we didn't have the money they confiscated the bike. Then my mother borrowed money from someone and we got back the bike. We managed to just about repay that person and have some money for food. We had to buy ration rice.

There were no job opportunities. Even if we got called for work we were sometimes sent back because there was a surplus of job-seekers. Such occasions were a waste of petrol and I wouldn't have money to refuel to get back home, so I would be forced to stay over at a relative's home.

Maya : Now lockdown restrictions are being relaxed and movement is freer than before. How are things now?

Karim : Even though there are fewer restrictions, what happens is that they call us for painting work but when we go there

they are worried about whether we are affected with corona virus! Or else we aren't given the job. I spend Rs. 100 on fuel in the hope of getting a job that pays Rs. 500, but when the job is lost the fuel money is wasted. When there is no painting work and we try for a job in some company they say the prospects are looking dull.

Maya : How is the health situation?

Karim : My brother walks on all fours, so he gets sores and blisters on his palms and knees. He doesn't feel pain because those areas have developed calluses, but they bleed and leak fluid. During the lockdown we weren't able to give him medical care. Even my mother fell ill at that time, she was suffering from exhaustion and I had to take her to get injections at a nearby GH [general hospital].

Maya : Did you take your brother to the hospital after the restrictions were eased?

Karim : Yes, we did Maya. They gave him injections and everything. But we aren't able to take him there regularly because we can't afford it. We are dressing his wounds at home and taking care of him with difficulty.

Our mother is still not doing well. She goes to work despite body pain. She is a cleaner at a poultry farm and gets paid Rs100 or 150 per day. She is allergic to the dust there but she still goes because we have no option. I am also going to do whatever work I can find.

Maya : Does your mother work near home or far?

Karim : My mother works nearby, just 1 or 2 km from our house. I drop her off and she returns home on foot with the other workers.

Maya : Where is your father now?

Karim : He is a goatherd. He stays near the Kerala border and is gone for three to six months at a time. But because of the lockdown he hasn't been able to come home for over seven months now and has been unable to help us. He gets an annual salary, he's not paid monthly. I can't go to meet him; travelling during the pandemic will be hugely risky.

Maya : Who lives with you in your house?

Karim : My brother Gautam, my wife Lavanya and my mother.

Maya : Oh you are married?

Karim : Yes.

Maya : Congratulations!

Karim : Thank you Maya.

Maya : What is she doing?

Karim : My wife is a homemaker. She is disabled; she does not have her right hand. She also has medical problems like thyroid and bleeding. To meet our food and medical expenses is proving difficult; we have borrowed money and we need to pay back the lenders.

Maya : People have said they are feeling stressed and distressed during the lockdown. Is that happening to you?

Karim : What can I say, Maya? I am stressed because I am unable to pay back the loans. I am feeling bad about not getting work. I am upset about not being able to take care of my family. That is making me very distressed.

Maya : Okay Karim. Soon this lockdown will end, and vaccines are on their way. Everything will come back to normal. We are going forward holding onto that hope. You also hold onto that hope.

Gautam

Maya : Hi Gautam. How are you?

Gautam : Good. How are you?

Maya : I called you to ask you about how you were doing before and during the lockdown. Can you tell me how it was?

Gautam : I was working earlier but now I don't have work. I am not able to work because of the sores on my legs and knees.

Maya : What does the doctor say?

Gautam : Doctor said that they are caused by stones or thorns. I am not doing so well now. I have some heart problems as well. I wasn't able to go to the hospital and I still don't have a wheelchair.

Maya : Have you submitted a request for a wheelchair?

Gautam : No I haven't.

Maya : Do you require one and do you want assistance to get one?

Gautam : Yes.

Maya : Who in your house is currently working?

Gautam : My mother and my elder brother.

Maya : I can understand that you are struggling a lot. We will let others know what is happening. As you know, lockdown is being relaxed. You said your mother and brother are working. We hope they will be able to find more and better work. Please believe in that. Do not falter. Please stay happy, everything will work out. I am happy to have spoken with you. Bye.

Trupti

- Trupti** : Hi, my name is Trupti. I am from Bhimavaram. I am a trans woman. When I was a child I was unaware of this fact.
- Gangabhavani** : You are two children of the same mother and both of you are intersex, which is surprising.
- Trupti** : The most amazing thing is we are not two children, we are three, and all of us are like this! My younger twin brothers are also like me. And we made sure to hide this from our family, so they don't know we are all intersex.
- Gangabhavani** : But why are you identifying yourselves as transgender? Is it because nobody knows what intersex is or are you scared that society will judge you?
- Trupti** : Intersex or trans women are the same. But people generally don't understand about intersex babies. So we identify as trans women.
- Gangabhavani** : How was school? Were kids making fun of you?
- Trupti** : When we faced such situations we used to come up with various excuses for not going to school. And finally somehow we completed our school education from home. After I finished school people started noticing some changes in my behaviour and started asking me things like "Why do you walk like this? Why do you speak this way?" I enrolled in college but I never attended classes. I would only go to write exams.

- Gangabhavani** : You never revealed your intersex status to your parents, but what about when there was some family gathering and people would come up to talk to you?
- Trupti** : We haven't attended any family function till now. We would make up some excuse to not go there.
- Gangabhavani** : Did they never ask why you were absent?
- Trupti** : They would keep asking my mother but she would respond casually. When relatives visited our home, we would just greet them and slip out of the house on the pretext of having some work.
- Gangabhavani** : Did you look for employment?
- Trupti** : I discontinued my degree course and completed my TTC (teacher training course). Then, I began looking for a job.
- Gangabhavani** : What kind of discrimination have you faced at work?
- Trupti** : At the workplace, people would not speak to me. They would pretend I didn't exist. They might not have troubled me directly but they would not mingle with me, we never socialised. The fear of being judged was ever present. I was scared to speak. With no communication it would become difficult to work, and so I would quit. I would at least try to blend in with others but my brothers didn't know how, in just one look people would recognise them as being different. So no one ever gave them a job.
- Gangabhavani** : Did you ever try to talk to your parents?

- Trupti** : I tried many times but was scared how they would respond. I was afraid they might die or get a stroke.
- Gangabhavani** : You said earlier that you felt it was better to die than to live a life like this. All three of you wanted to kill yourselves. Why?
- Trupti** : Right from our childhood, we had nobody except ourselves to speak to or share our feelings with. Even though we wanted to speak to others we were afraid they would come to know about our being intersex and so we kept quiet. We had no employment — at least I am doing something, but my brothers aren't working and people keep asking, why aren't these two going for work? We prayed to the goddess and told her about our situation, and that if things got worse we had decided to kill ourselves.
- Gangabhavani** : Did anyone come to help you? Was there anyone to offer emotional support?
- Trupti** : We wanted to be part of a [transgender] community like ours. I know those communities exist. But we feared they might treat us badly or rudely, so we never reached out to them. There are many who are like us, they do interviews and post them on YouTube. There is something called TransVision channel, I think Rachana madam [Rachana Mudraboyina] started it. Then there's Anjali amma [Anjali N], that's what we call her. On Facebook we saw that she was coming to give a lecture in a church in a village and we decided to go there but the lecture didn't happen. However we made a note of the number of the church and called them later and got her number. We called her and said we are going to die. She told us not to do that and explained that apart from begging and other

methods there are places where we can work and earn our livelihood. She also said there are many opportunities for people like us and Rachana knows about these things. She also told us not to worry and promised to help us look for work. She gave us courage.

Gangabhavani : COVID-19 has been a huge problem for everyone. You didn't have a job during that time, I believe. Where did you work before?

Trupti : One of my teachers at the TTC centre started an Ayurveda hospital and there was a job opportunity there which I took. But there was too much work and not enough salary so I could not work there for very long. Then there was a post vacant for a drawing teacher at Aditya School near my home. I got the job, and I used to get a monthly salary of Rs. 12,000.

Gangabhavani : Did your colleagues or students discriminate against you?

Trupti : I didn't have much work. I just had to go for four hours a week. Our teaching method was through the use of TLM [Teaching / Learning Materials]. A teacher would give me an assignment of what charts and drawings I had to make. I would finish that work at home.

Gangabhavani : Why did you quit?

Trupti : I couldn't work openly there. No one knew about my gender status. To be frank I didn't face any harassment; I just didn't like that place.

Gangabhavani : You said you did some training. What was that?

Trupti : I was looking for a better job, and that's when I came across Rudra-madam who lives in Tirupati and trains transgender persons in media and entertainment. She said they would employ the three of us if we were open about who we are. I thought that was a good idea since we could work freely and comfortably. Hence we decided to go there and get trained. Training was for three months. Meanwhile, someone else took my place at the school.

Gangabhavani : Did you get a job after training? How did it go?

Trupti : They gave us Rs. 3000 per month for two months. By the time we returned home after training, the Corona virus pandemic began.

Gangabhavani : How did you survive during the lockdown?

Trupti : We really had a hard time. We didn't have a single paisa. Besides, we had to stay at home. We may not be a burden to our parents but neighbours and relatives would needle them and ask them why we were still not working. Hearing these comments our parents would scold or warn us. Everyone was staying at home during the lockdown but our relatives would behave as if we were the only ones staying at home. We had a tough time in those three months.

We felt really bad when we heard people badmouthing us. In front of us they would tell one another, "What happened to these guys? I think there's something different about them." When we were children we did not take these comments seriously, but now we are adults and we feel pain.

Gangabhavani : Did you try to speak to those people or explain to them?

- Trupti** : If we tried to question them they would avoid speaking to us. They would provoke us by saying things to one another in our hearing and then pretend they weren't referring to us. Sometimes I would want to shout out, the same god who created you all has also created me, there is nothing different about me. I feel like yelling at them, "Who are you to bother about me? Are you the one feeding me? Are you taking care of me?" But I don't want to reveal myself to others because I am afraid the news might reach my parents.
- Gangabhavani** : Didn't you know that there are places where transgender persons get employed? Have you ever hoped to move out of your home and work?
- Trupti** : We are living with that hope. Before training we didn't know anything or anyone except our Anjali-amma. But after training, after going there and meeting so many people who were responding so well to questions about themselves, I thought we would go to settle down in Hyderabad. That's exactly when COVID-19 hit us, and then the lockdown.
- Gangabhavani** : Did you have any health problems during the lockdown?
- Trupti** : None at all. Not even a cold!
- Gangabhavani** : That's very nice to hear. Now, did you know that there are some intersex groups like IHRI [Intersex Human Rights India]?
- Trupti** : Yes, I knew.
- Gangabhavani** : Did you think of joining or working with them?
- Trupti** : There is a great lack of awareness about these things in villages. People who know about these things

live in cities, and that is why we move to cities. There are many like us in Hyderabad, and some in Vijayawada, living in groups because they cannot live individually. But to meet the Hyderabad group is difficult for us now because there are no trains.

Gangabhavani : Are you looking for any local jobs?

Trupti : I want to try. But schools are not open. Apart from teaching in school I know nothing else. My brothers in fact have more problems than me.

Gangabhavani : You have clearly told me about your pain and problems. Now, if there is an opportunity for you to be a part of and speak about intersex groups, will you be ready to speak?

Trupti : Where, madam?

Gangabhavani : On stage, with a mic.

Trupti : I would like to talk but... I don't know where that will be telecast.

Gangabhavani : It won't go anywhere beyond IHRI, which is an unregistered body, a collective currently on WhatsApp. In this group, health issues and problems related to intersex persons are discussed. If there's an opportunity for you to share your experiences in that group, will you be able to do so? It is confidential and they are careful about your details.

Trupti : Hmm.

Gangabhavani : OK Trupti, thank you so much. If I have any questions or doubts I will call you again.

Trupti : Thank you amma.

Vinaya

Maya : Hi Vinaya, a very good evening. How are you?

Vinaya : Good, good, I am good. I am in Kerala.

Maya : That's good. It's a good place, we also like it. What are you doing now?

Vinaya : I was doing freelance work but it is no longer available because of the lockdown. So I am concentrating on my writing and translation. I am a writer.

Maya : Yes. I saw some of your videos and I am very happy that you are doing this. This will be an example for others as well. So what did you before the lockdown? How did you cope during the lockdown and how are you doing now?

Vinaya : I used to take a lot of classes and sessions where I working on creating awareness about intersex and transgender people. But all of that has come to a complete stop. The seminars have become webinars. The problem with webinars is that there is no remuneration. Or else, they give Rs. 1000 or Rs. 1500 for speaking 2 or 3 hours. This is a big problem. There used to be times when I would receive Rs. 10000 in a month or sometimes Rs. 4000 or Rs. 5000 per day but now there is no salary and the organisers of sessions pay very little. So it is very hard.

Maya : Yes I understand. This is happening everywhere. But now, compared to in the past, things are different, people are helping out the LGBT community. I am sure you will receive programmes and projects soon. So you were saying that webinars don't give you much remuneration. Has anyone helped you out financially?

Vinaya : Yes. The Kerala Government gave everyone with the transgender identity card, a relief kit at the beginning of the lockdown. Many NGOs are also helping, and many friends too who know my financial problems. In my personal life I am doing okay since this lockdown was a period when my family and my mother started accepting me. But as far as the money is concerned, I don't earn as before. Even if friends and others are helping out, earning my own money is a different thing, it carries a deeper meaning for me.

Maya : Definitely. Now, during the lockdown did you face any health issues?

Vinaya : Yes, I have many health problems. I have a fatty liver and diabetes. The hospital I go to is Vela Hospital in Coimbatore. I do not go to doctors in Kerala. I haven't been able to go to Coimbatore for the last six months and have been consulting my doctor over the phone. I have some trouble with my liver and I am taking painkillers for the pain, but not being able to meet my doctor in person is causing me tension.

Maya : Yes there is definitely a difference between seeing the doctor in person and consulting online or over the phone. Are you satisfied with your treatment in Vela Hospital?

Vinaya : Yes, I am very happy, because my doctor is like a Photostat copy, he understands exactly what I am trying to say! I go only to him even for minor ailments, ha-ha.

Maya : That is really good. The doctors here don't understand what we are going through and still they try to force their view on us and don't accept what we say. Only a few doctors treat us after understanding us and our health problem. In that respect you are very lucky.

- Vinaya :** He takes time, like an hour, to listen to us, then explains our problem to us, his treatment plan, details of the medicine, its effect etc. He maintains a good rapport. We inevitably place trust in him. That trust itself eases our health problems.
- Maya :** Oh, so now I understand that along with sensitising the public you must also have sensitised your doctor.
- Vinaya :** Yes, yes!
- Maya :** As an intersex person how do you want to live in this society?
- Vinaya :** In our society there is a divide, a boundary for male and female. But there are people beyond that. Intersex people are a reality. But in our society there are questions and doubts about whether such people exist, whether it's an abnormality etc. Our society needs to be made aware. Now, who should bring this awareness, the government or intersex people? I am volunteering to speak up about us intersex people who are also transgender. I will talk about my community, who we are, who I am. I have been doing the same thing earlier as well, talking about different identities, and how none of them are abnormalities, they are all normal. But our society needs to listen. It is only together that we can bring justice to all. This is my wish.
- Maya :** You are doing a very good deed. This is not an abnormality at all. We, intersex people, are also just like others, it's a natural phenomenon. But many do not understand this. You are involved in many things that will help others understand. I am very happy to have spoken to you.

Solidarity Foundation

#7, Sweet Water Well Road

Nagashetty halli, RMV 2nd Stage

Bangalore: 560094

Phone: 080-40990154

E-mail: solidarityfoundation2013@gmail.com

Web: www.solidarityfoundation.in

